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Franchot edging into picture

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by Josh Kurtz
Staff Writer

June 14, 2002

Delegate sets sights on Townsend ticket

ANNAPOLIS -- Until he was "outed" by Montgomery Journal columnist Blair Lee two weeks ago, Del. Peter Franchot's apparent interest in becoming Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend's running mate had not gotten much public airing.

Franchot (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park told friends that he believed his chances of being tapped by Townsend (D) were enhanced by staying off the political insiders' radar screens, and that he would not benefit by appearing on newspapers' lists of possible contenders.

But on Tuesday evening, Franchot, who works for a top-flight Washington, D.C., lobbying firm, held a coming-out party of sorts.

At a downtown Washington bistro during a celebrity-studded happy hour he hosted, Franchot helped the Townsend campaign raise more than \$100,000. The guests included actor Martin Sheen, who had been travelling with Townsend; U.S. Reps. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville and Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.), Townsend's cousin; former congressman and basketball star Tom McMillen; and several Washington lobbyists.

"It was a very impressive crowd," said House Appropriations Committee Chairman Howard P. Rawlings (D-Dist. 40) of Baltimore, who was there.

Now that Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley (D) has declared that he will not be a candidate for governor this year, Townsend and her aides have begun thinking more seriously about whom she should select as her running mate. Michael Morrill, a Townsend spokesman, said the campaign has begun the winnowing process in earnest, and expects to have the list pared down to a few finalists by the end of next week.

Coincidentally or not, Franchot, a four-term legislator, is now near the top of the list, in the informed opinion of the chattering classes. He joins House Economic Matters Committee Chairman Michael E. Busch (D-Dist. 30) of Annapolis, Montgomery County Councilman Isiah Leggett (D-At large) of Burtonsville, Ocean City Mayor James Mathias (D) and Speaker of the House Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D-Dist. 1C) of Cumberland as the other leading contenders. A dark horse candidate is also possible.

Several knowledgeable Democrats told The Gazette this week that Franchot may be able to use his party for Townsend -- and his obvious ability to raise money -- to his advantage in the running mate sweepstakes, even though Townsend has plenty of fund-raising firepower of her own.

"He raised a pretty impressive sum of money," Rawlings said. "I'm sure that will hold him in good stead with Kathleen's advisers and with the lieutenant governor. That event advantaged him."

Said another person who attended the fund-raiser: "The ability to raise money also speaks to qualities above the ability to raise money. It speaks to loyalty of supporters. It speaks to a certain tenacity."

As chairman of a key budget subcommittee who comes from voter-rich Montgomery County, as a modulated liberal known for his personal loyalty, Franchot could bring other strengths to the ticket, leading Democrats said.

Morrill said Tuesday's fund-raiser would have no bearing on Townsend's decision.

"We are not running auditions," he said. "We have a lot of friends who hold events for the campaign. ... There are no tea leaves to be read here."

Franchot -- in keeping with his desire not to have the spotlight shown on him -- did not respond to several messages left at his Washington office Wednesday and Thursday.

His stance contrasts sharply with Leggett, who declared his interest in the lieutenant governor's slot in a

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long interview with The (Baltimore) Sun, published earlier this week. In the interview, Leggett all but dared Townsend to select him, arguing that African-American voter turnout could be deflated if she does not.

Leggett declined to comment for this story. But The Gazette has learned that earlier this week he met with top Townsend aides, who laid out in general detail some of the duties Townsend is expecting her running mate to take on.

Whether Leggett's putative candidacy has been hurt by O'Malley's withdrawal from the race -- or by the Court of Appeals decision striking down Gov. Parris N. Glendening's legislative redistricting plan -- remains to be seen. Leggett served on the governor's commission that recommended the redistricting plan, but so did Taylor.



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